

INSPIRATION THROUGH CATALOGING*

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ONE of the most common superstitions about library work is that it offers not only a fair social advantage but also a snug haven of rest, relaxation and perpetual delight to the person fond of literary pursuits. We all know that stern reality does not sustain this popular view; that we are not called upon to collect, but to dispense information, and that mere enthusiasm about books will lead us nowhere, unless it is properly balanced with a wholesome regard for library routine and a willingness to bow to the spirit of service.

Education for library work presupposes such a tempering of enthusiasm to a practical end. We are not dreamers, but workers. We are not poets or historians or scientists shelved in a library position in order to enjoy leisure for a set study. Library training justly emphasizes the business, social and routine phases of library activity, and the personal equation is expected to be solved by personal effort.

I am concerned here with this personal equation. There is no lack of evidence in the experience of every one of us to show that its solution is a matter of common interest. We know that many are called but few are chosen, even in our profession. We are aware of a tendency of the young in our ranks leading away from its philosophical, scientific aspects and even disregarding the routine details, and instead making straight for what is termed administrative work. This is not an evidence of ambition toward higher things as much as it is due to the belief that an easier life and a greater power go with administrative and representative duties; which is another delusion. We also know colleagues who perform routine duties in the spirit that fate has wronged them by consigning them to drudgery, and who regard their work as a necessary evil, hoping that the tide may turn and land them high and dry in a swivel chair on a Brussels rug in an exclusive office. The feeling of dissatisfaction with routine work undoubtedly is

responsible for much lack of buoyancy and for many a case of nervous prostration among library workers.

I give praise to the sentiment that whether we catalog, classify, shelve books or label them, file cards in a catalog or gather in our hands the threads, the web-work of administration, *we all are librarians*. I claim for us the ideal spirit that during the janitor's sickness any one of us willingly and in sight of everybody would sweep out the reading-room or dust the furniture. I still am to meet the librarian that refuses to admit the equal necessity of all work in the library, the equal privilege of doing it, the equal honor in performing it well.

This is theory and philosophy. In practice, we frequently think differently. The work, well done, does not always seem its own reward. Cataloging and classification will grow monotonous, the preliminary leaves, semicolons, plates, subject headings and what not, bore us, and we chafe at the necessity which dooms us to merely pass into the routine a book which we would rather read and enjoy.

These days of severe specialization are apt to foster the idea that only functioning administrators are librarians *ex professo*, while those who functionate in special line of work possess no general view of the whole field—precisely as the chief librarian is not considered versed in the details of other specialties than those which he prefers. The functioning librarian may speak for himself, yet as a type of worker he undoubtedly deserves credit for a mastery of detail not often attributed to him. The functioning *specialist*, however, frequently lacks the broad outlook on library science, and remains content to support such linguistic immoralities as "cataloger," "classifier," "shelver," "subject-headinger," "card-filer,"—the result being that only a "reference librarian" is considered some sort of librarian, others are mere clerks. Even the romantic title of "page" is of some positive value as compared with the ignominy of "shelflister,"

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just as a Reginald or Horace will color the human clay differently from that designated by John or Peter. The clay does not become inferior, perhaps, but different. Luke McLuke asserts that "the name is one-half of the education." Our specialties begin with their names,—they should not end with them!

If we fall into the error of regarding invariably the cataloger only as a person who catalogs books but is supposed to know little else, we are apt to narrow the sphere of influence and utility of a person perhaps well versed in matters of other special and probably general interest in the library. We cannot wonder that cataloging has fallen into most undeserved disrepute as a monotonous, grinding occupation involving some tedious routine, much pettifoggery and automatism unworthy of a real live woman's or man's efforts. Classification still retains some flavor, because one may gain reference knowledge or other useful insight from even a casual glance at a book.

The cataloger's professional attitude depends in a measure upon the value set upon the work by others. But it depends emphatically upon the cataloging librarian's estimate of his own efforts, their general and relative importance, their results. Experience seems to prove without doubt that a great deal of that knowledge by which a librarian's usefulness is measured, begins and ends with the art of cataloging. It is an art, the doing of which can be learned, but the philosophy of which develops only with personal growth toward the ideal. Describing a book accurately and adequately for a definite purpose certainly is an accomplishment worth striving for; if it is not worth doing passing well, no library work is of any value. The very keynote of the work is as democratic as the plan of the city directory where none is excluded because of rank or fortune. The catalog department is the one place in the library where all books are treated equally, without reference to their individual merits, described calmly and committed to the catalog to win such use and favor as they deserve.

While the work of cataloging is a routine effort depending for its efficiency upon the intelligent observance of a code of rules, the very intellectual character of this work should presuppose in the cataloger a *personal* method as a safeguard against monotony and drudgery. This can be indicated better than described. First and foremost, let it be remembered that all rules for cataloging yet are in a preliminary and preparatory state, and that we are far from creating in the reader's mind an adequate picture of any book by simply recording the title, noting some of the most apparent physical and historical peculiarities of the book, and confiding to the world some subjects of which the book seems to treat. The cataloger should know that his art still is in a state of development; that many cataloging problems await a general solution; that the ideal of full and adequate book-description still is a far and distant light. It always gives courage and buoyancy to know that we are carrying stones to a common temple; and certainly, every day's work must satisfy any of us that we can work our problems and accumulate intelligence of common interest to all. Here the personal method should apply itself. If we carry out easily and cheerfully those rules which already have been formulated for general practice, we shall be able to reserve some effort for those problems which are still to be solved. We may carry the particular detail which engages our attention, through the process of comparative study, until by observation and experiment we have surveyed it fully and succeeded, perhaps, in solving it, thus adding a trifle to the common store of professional knowledge and gaining the high joy felt by the pioneer in breaking new soil.

By the term personal method I do not mean a free, individual use and interpretation of cataloging rules, for each library is bound to demand a historical continuance in the methods of work it sustains, and this does not permit a free play of personal preferences. Furthermore, it is not contrary to freedom and independence to follow a system which, although the individ-

ual may chafe at certain inconveniences, represents a collective effort, historically fixed and of known efficiency. A personal method is *that economy of efficiency which draws the line between essential and unessential, which lets the rule and regulation have its way in all ordinary questions, which wastes no effort in discussing futilities, but bristles with alertness to new forms, important distinctions and rare opportunities.* There are some catalogers who seem incapable of anything but debating the distinction between illustrations and diagrams; who spend every grain of their energy upon the elaboration of impossible and misleading author and subject headings, collations and descriptive notes, plagiarizing information easily available everywhere. In such cases, the "cataloger" is not the master of the catalog, but the catalog governs him—not as a cherished care of which he is proud, but as a burden. His mind may be perfectly serene as to the treatment of literature on apples until he runs up against the reports of a pomological society and realizes that he cannot use the subject heading "Apples—societies," and relapses into consternation, because he cannot be consistent. If of a literary bent he may remember with a sad feeling the young farmer in Eugene Field's story who bought an encyclopedia and looked up the subject of "apples" when they came, and searched under "baby" when the baby caught the measles. He was referred to "pomology" and "maternity," respectively, and growled because the volumes containing these letters had not yet appeared. George Eliot throws him into cold perspiration until, after having consulted every available source of information, he produces the following beautiful concoction:

Eliot, George, *pseud.*, i. e., Marian Evans, *afterwards* Cross, 1819-1880.
 Cross, Mrs. Marian (Evans). See Eliot, George, *pseud.*, i. e., Marian Evans, *afterwards* Cross, 1819-1880.
 Evans, Marian (Mrs. Cross). See Eliot, George, *pseud.*, i. e., Marian Evans, *afterwards* Cross, 1819-1880.

Small wonder that catalogers go into nervous prostration under the strain of the dictations of a supposedly harsh catalog which demands the distinction of being an

encyclopedia of universal knowledge rather than a discreet guide to the library's resources of books.

Let us turn the leaf and consider how that inspiration which means well balanced power and mastery of required method, may be won.

One important source of inspiration to the cataloger is the library itself, the mass of books with their actual or potential value for public reference or enlightenment. The library may be small, sordid, commonplace, and the cataloger may despair of it, but this despair should relieve itself in an effort to build up the catalog all the more effectively. Analytical entries, or even a sort of indexing, will do wonders to increase the efficacy of a limited collection of books. If the library is deficient in modern, up-to-date books, the cataloger's duty consists in bringing to light all that is of actual value to the community, according to the spirit of Mark Tapley, who grew more alert, the darker and drearier the prospects were. Not one of the little, outdated, perhaps mismanaged libraries is indifferent, nor the library which lacks support,—for the *problems* are there; and problems turn up to be solved, not to be despaired of. The worse the catalog, the greater the necessity of renewing it. If one can do nothing with a small library and under adverse circumstances, he had better not imagine that an easier life or a large institution will make him either more efficient or more happy.

One very important matter—one, moreover, which touches upon the personal method aforesaid—is that the cataloger never should become *isolated*. The principle of specialization frequently isolates workers in different departments of even moderate-sized libraries. The cataloger may feel that his very work relegates him to a place out of touch with what is going on in the library. This isolation is not necessary. I admit that the average daily working period is too long for most employes in the modern library, but I contend also that whoever works strictly by the clock fails to have acquired the correct institutional spirit and attitude. This spirit

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demands that you reach out at all times and make certain of being in ready, sympathetic mental intercommunication with your surroundings. In a large library, an occasional extra hour or two spent in looking about, in studying the catalog, in exchanging opinions with colleagues, in the hundreds of ways offered by intellectual workers housed under one roof, will assist materially to build up that *esprit de corps* without which we despair.

Again, there is a great satisfaction in doing justice to a book which partakes of the public service extended by the library. A good and useful book—any book in the true sense—will reward your efforts, perhaps by being worn out with use; or it may back up on you and remind you of some mistake in its treatment. Books respond in these ways almost as readily as human beings.

Nor are the human beings themselves slow in responding where the right word has been spoken. The cataloger always should consider himself in direct intercommunication with the reading public; should speak through his catalog, of the books, tersely and clearly, with the one object in mind of engaging the reader's attention. If he fails, it is not the fault of the public, it is the fault of him who has not spoken well enough, advertised well enough, offered strongly enough the opportunity which it is his business to see in behalf of others.

In the large libraries all these conditions are emphasized and more complicated, but not different. There, the cataloger has the added advantage of finding the great books and of co-operating with persons who know them. The advantage to the cataloger of working in a large library lies chiefly in the wider range of view and in the greater historical outlook induced by the greater mass of books. On the other hand, the danger of isolation grows with the greater specialization, and the isolation embodies the most significant source of discomfort of the cataloger. A wise organization will do all in its power to harmonize the different elements among the workers, by assigning some reference work, book selection, advertising, etc., to such as might

suffer from the monotony of one continuously repeated effort.

It is possible that some of the ill repute of cataloging may arise from a fault of adjustment which is a common trait of many young librarians in these days of strenuous life. The library worker who follows the recognized and universally applauded course of professional training, will acquire a college education, followed by a library school course, and then, suddenly, *his education ceases*; he no longer reads professional literature, no longer feels the spur of a definite purpose, but plunges into work and is lost in it. Many and many a library worker who studies eagerly and with good results while at school, becomes indifferent to library science and library literature as soon as he lands in a position. Thenceforth he thinks of little else than his daily duties, and carries stones to no building but the cherished castle of his own success. Many and many of this type of library worker never read, far less study, a book, but fling themselves into work at that pace which kills, which stifles the higher ambition and renders its slaves incapable of personal growth, philosophic view and ideal striving. Why go to the trouble and expense of a special education for librarianship, merely to toil strenuously for outward success and gain, when we know that the same amount of dynamic effort in other lines will produce far greater remuneration? Why seek library work at all, unless one strives toward the ideal which colored the lives of such men as Panizzi, Ebert, Justin Winsor, and Spofford? Rarely if ever do the executives of our large libraries antagonize an effort toward personal growth and development in their subordinate associates; on the contrary, a ready and free sympathy is reached out to those who strive for higher things.

No library worker can succeed in the higher sense without being somewhat of a *studiosus perpetuus*, nor can he create harmony within himself without dreaming the healthy dream of high hope. Efficiency alone is as much a curse as knowledge alone. Only a handful of years ago men's

time was of scant commercial value compared with its value to-day. But the woman or man is lost who thinks he has solved the great life problem of an occupation when he has succeeded in trading his time and work against a fair economic equivalent. The frequent changes in library staffs all over the country, and the rather numerous adventures in neurasthenia, prove that the few suggestions offered here are not entirely out of season. There is some need of a pastoral theology for library workers!

The problem which I have tried to discuss freely and without prejudice to any side, may be summed up in a simile. Years ago a man came out of a country of wild heather and fresh breezes to a great metropolis, where an unkind fate consigned him to a night's so-called rest in a large modern hotel which faced an open square. He went to his room, but could not sleep. He lay awake long, listening to the noises within the immense building and without, in the vast city surrounding him. Finally he arose, opened a window and looked out. There was the rush of sound in his ears, of

clang and noise,—but not one sound which he knew. He listened a long time. Then, of a sudden, he became all alive with attention. He heard something which he recognized. It was springtime, and from high above the city came the dart of swift wings and the honk of the wild geese and other migratory birds which travel by night. He knew the sound of each new and different flock that came. None was visible, but they were there, and he felt grateful and at rest.

Such is in some respects the position of the worker in a modern library. The din and rush of the routine are around him, and he responds with sullenness or cynicism, or becomes apathetic and automatic—unless he listens and reaches out for the higher, but often hidden, symbols of freedom and joy, and listens for the chorus of gleeful and jubilant praise which is everywhere to be heard by him who listens earnestly. And then he will turn to his work with a morning face, glad that he is there, his work awaiting him, *his* work, because duty alone does not call him, nor the reward, nor anybody's praise, but the approval of his own conscience.

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